

20 July 1976

Hanoi, ASEAN, and the United States

Since April 1975, we have been asking ourselves: will a reunited Vietnam under Communist control seek radical change in Southeast Asia through support for insurgency and other pressures on its neighbors? Or will it focus on achieving an accepted and perhaps leading position in the region through actively cultivating government-to-government relations. It now seems that Hanoi has opted for the latter course and, in so doing, is addressing a very receptive audience. Closer association between Hanoi and the ASEAN countries would contribute to the stabilization of the region and reduce opportunities for outside intervention. But it would probably also strengthen trends toward regional identification with third world causes that run counter to US interests. Movement toward the implementation of neutralist principles might also become more rapid, with implications for our base presence in the Philippines and for logistic support of our Indian Ocean position.

1. We have no evidence of increased Vietnamese support for insurgency over the last year. Meanwhile, recent statements and actions indicate that Hanoi has embarked on an effort not only to mend its fences with its ASEAN neighbors but also to gain acceptance as a member of the Southeast Asian community.

2. Policy statements in connection with the inauguration of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and with Vice Foreign Minister Phan Hien's ASEAN trip stressed:

-- Hanoi's desire for friendly relations and cooperation with its neighbors on the basis of the principles of peaceful coexistence that have been standard Asian rhetoric since they were accepted by aligned and non-aligned countries alike at the Bandung Conference in 1955;

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- its identification with the goal of "complete mastery of Southeast Asia by Southeast Asians";
- its own historic role in contributing to the achievement of this goal;
- its support for the efforts of the Southeast Asian countries "to become truly independent, peaceful and neutral nations without military bases and troops of the imperialists on their territories";
- its endorsement of "cooperation among countries of the region for the building of prosperity in keeping with each country's specific conditions."

3. Affirmations of support for "just struggle" continue, but are carefully obscure on the question of whether the justly-struggling "people" are insurgents struggling against their governments, or merely new nations struggling against imperialism.

4. Also of interest in connection with Hanoi's new moderate tone was Nhan Dan's bicentennial greeting. As summarized by the SRV's domestic service, the article:

- took note of the "pleasant coincidence that the SRV was born on nearly the same day the American people celebrate the 200th anniversary of their country";
- while describing American capitalism as plunged into even deeper crisis by defeat in Indochina, nevertheless paid great tribute to American achievements past and present in productivity, inventiveness, and even in space;
- cited President Ford's statement that "the events in Indochina do not herald the end of the world or the end of the leading role of the United States in the world" and his advice to the American people to "look ahead to future tasks."

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5. It is arguable that Hanoi -- still with difficult internal tasks ahead -- is adopting a purely tactical stance intended to lull its neighbors into complacency and weaken their resistance to future efforts to dominate the region and convert its governments to the Vietnamese brand of communism. One can question also whether the SRV can achieve any significant degree of genuine compatibility with its neighbors in view of:

- the conflict between its communist doctrine and socialist economy and their anti-communism and market economies;
- a host of differences with Thailand, some of which antedate the role of the latter in the Indochina war;
- its links with the insurgents in Thailand, a source of concern not only to Bangkok but to the other ASEAN countries as well;
- conflicting claims with Manila in the Spratlys, with Jakarta in the South China Sea, and with Bangkok in the Gulf of Thailand;
- the presumed strength of its own ambitions for leadership at the expense of other contenders for this role, especially Indonesia.

6. Outweighing these problems, however, may be the compatibility of certain of its broader interests with those of its ASEAN neighbors:

- it shares with them a strong drive to avoid subordination, national or regional, to any outside power;
- in its own quest for international status, its neighbors are its natural partners -- Peking and Moscow are too big and too dangerous while North Korea and the radical Arabs and Africans are too remote in location and in their preoccupations.

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7. The interest of the ASEAN countries in amicable relations with Hanoi has been evident since the end of the war in Indochina. There is considerable fear of the uses to which Hanoi might put its power. But running side by side with apprehension is the belief that Hanoi's temptations to work against the interests of the ASEAN countries can be reduced by making evident their own disinclination to work against the interests of the SRV and even their desire to assist in its reconstruction.

8. Closer association with the SRV could seem advantageous to the ASEAN countries:

- in reducing their concern with possible destabilizing effects on the region as a whole of strong Sino-Soviet competition for influence in one or more countries of the region;
- in adding weight to regional aspirations for identity and autonomy;
- in supporting their claim (for some of them still rather insecure) to full membership in the third world;
- in increasing the influence of the region in third world councils.

9. Ideological differences are unlikely to constitute a significant obstacle to closer association. In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, domestic anti-communism has long ceased to have much influence on external relations. Political authoritarianism is the prevailing pattern in the region in any case, while the balance between free market and controlled economies is moving increasingly in the direction of the latter. Non-ideological differences between Hanoi and its neighbors are no more intense than many of the differences between ASEAN countries; the Philippine claim to Sabah; the antagonisms generated by the presence of disaffected Muslim minorities in Thailand and the Philippines between these countries and Malaysia; and Singapore's fears of the intentions of its Malay neighbors. Nor would concern over Hanoi's pretensions to leadership necessarily be very much greater than concern over Jakarta's ambitions; one Malaysian comment suggested a pleased expectation that competition between the two would help keep both in check.

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10. The inclusion of Hanoi in the regional understanding is unlikely to alter significantly the subtle adjustments that have enabled the countries of the region:

- to leave bilateral issues unsettled while moving toward greater regional cooperation;
- to make pragmatic distinctions between positions that must remain national and positions that can become regional;
- and to speak as ASEAN only when consensus has been reached not merely on the question at issue, but also on whether it is a question on which ASEAN can appropriately go on record.

11. The path to closer association has obvious limits with respect to the distance to be travelled and the likely speed of movement. Bilateral differences and suspicions, as well as differences in outlook, will exert a restraining influence, just as they continue to do in the evolution of ASEAN. Hanoi is no more likely than Peking to abandon completely its ties with revolutionary movements and may well manipulate its links with the Thai insurgents to put pressure on Bangkok. Nor is it likely that Hanoi will want to join ASEAN any time soon, or that the ASEAN countries will wish it to do so.

12. This notwithstanding, movement toward closer association between Hanoi and the ASEAN countries seems very likely over the next few years. Such movement would certainly contribute to regional stability, reduce the opportunities for outside intervention in the region's affairs, and strengthen the capabilities of the Southeast Asian region for action on its own behalf. But by the same token, there would probably be some strengthening of tendencies to identify with third world causes that run counter to US interests in international economic affairs, in dealings with foreign capital, and in political matters. Movement toward the implementation of neutralist principles might also become more rapid, with implications for our base presence in the Philippines and for logistic support of our Indian Ocean position.



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